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The Circus of the Damned

BY KATHLEEN COSKRAN

Kathleen Coskran and Jimmy Colvin in June 2017.

WE MET ON THE PHONE: JIMMY, AN INMATE AT THE OAK PARK

Heights Correctional Facility, Minnesota's only level five maximum custody prison; me, an adjunct faculty member at Hamline University in St. Paul. He had earned his GED at El Reno Federal Reformatory in Oklahoma, and—despite his lack of undergraduate credits—talked his way into my graduate level writing class. He couldn't attend the three-hour class meetings in person, so I audiotaped each session and mailed him the tapes. He called me every Monday from the prison education director's office to discuss the readings and assignments.

I was nervous before that first call, but Jimmy Colvin made it easy. He sounded distinctly Southern, warm and friendly—a gregarious Louisiana Bayou boy talking to an introverted Georgia girl, both of whom ended up in the frigid north. I'd done it the easy way by marrying a Minnesotan. Jimmy's road was considerably harder: He had been bloodied by fellow inmates at the United States Penitentiary in Leavenworth, Kansas, and transferred to Minnesota for his safety.

In our weekly talks, Jimmy was responsive to everything I suggested and so grateful to have contact with somebody on the outside. A veteran of multiple escapes from juvenile facilities, he was writing a novel based on his escape some years earlier from the notorious Louisiana State Penitentiary, colloquially known as Angola. The chapter he submitted to the class was written in the voice of a boastful, muscle-bound narrator with an unfortunate fondness for adverbs and adjectives. It was awful, but we read it; I mailed him the tape of the class's frank discussion of his manuscript.

The transformation was notable: Jimmy made the biggest improvement from first draft to revision that I had ever seen. The chapter was beautifully re-imagined and rewritten. Not only had he heard

what had troubled me and his classmates, but he also understood what we saw as powerful and engaging.

Jimmy was a good student in other ways: enthusiastic, incisive, an appreciative reader of the assignments, and genuinely helpful in comments on fellow students' writing. I gave him an A. He had earned it.

That was twenty-five years ago.

Today, Jimmy is still incarcerated, at Rayburn Correctional Center, a medium security prison in Angie, Louisiana, where he works as night orderly for his unit key, the central area between four dorms. He keeps the key clean. When an inmate is sent to the hole, he transports their locker and mattress. He also brews coffee for prison officers—a perk because he's allowed to drink it, too.

Working in the key is a good duty, better than being a pusher—the guy who pushes a wheelchair for another inmate. Pushers don't mind helping the paraplegic man or the one with both legs amputated, but they avoid the eighty-two-year-old inmate who treats his pushers like servants. "Empty my pee jar," he'll yell.

At any given time, a dozen of the seventy-four inmates in Jimmy's unit are in wheelchairs. Others use walkers, dragging oxygen tanks behind them.

Kathleen Coskran is a writer in Minneapolis, Minnesota, currently working on a book about Jimmy Colvin titled Educated by the State: One Man's Journey from Juvenile Reformatory to Supermax Prison.



Jimmy Colvin with some of the artwork he's produced in prison.

Many are ill, with one man so emaciated that Jimmy calls him "Walking Bones." Almost all are in the pill line twice a day. He calls his prison life the "Circus of the Damned."

Jimmy Colvin has been a member of this circus, in one form or another, since he was thirteen years old, when he was sent to reform school for skipping school and joy riding. "Now you'll learn how to behave," the judge said. It was a prophetic statement; he did learn new behaviors.

At thirteen, Jimmy was a slight kid with a taste for exploration, adventure, and avoidance. He didn't do well in school, so he skipped, but he was never mean, never a bully or a fighter. He didn't need a roughneck persona until he arrived at the Louisiana Training Institute, a reform school for boys in Monroe. There he learned how to fight, never show fear, and to escape. His success at all three extended his time behind bars to cover his entire adolescence. By the time he was released, at age twenty-two, he was well prepared for the life that was being carved out for him.

On July 12, 1982, Jimmy entered a deli in Shreveport with a gun he says was a nonfiring Civil War replica pistol jammed in his belt. According to store employees, he demanded money; one of them emptied the cash register of \$136, he grabbed it, and left. He was arrested two weeks later and charged with armed robbery, even though his "weapon" was non-functional.

Jimmy's trial was irregular in many ways: his lawyer, under disbarment proceedings at the time, didn't object to a psychiatrist who declared that Jimmy was "anti-social" and "must go to jail." When Jimmy was found guilty, the judge sentenced him to eighty years at hard labor without benefit of parole, probation, or

suspension of sentence. It was his first adult conviction. A week later, he was in Angola prison.

Jimmy's escape from Angola in 1986 earned him a tour of federal prisons and the detour to Minnesota, but he served out his federal sentences in 2016 and was transported back to Louisiana to finish his eighty-year term.

He immediately filed for an evidentiary hearing to consider the multiple errors at his original trial, ranging from his representation by a lawyer later disbarred for incompetence and his excessive sentence for a robbery in which \$136 was taken and nobody was hurt. The judge granted an evidentiary hearing, but the assistant district attorney appealed, claiming the state was at a disadvantage because the disbarred lawyer had since died and could not testify.

Seventeen months later, on April 25, 2017, the evidentiary hearing was denied. On February 11, 2019, his postconviction review was final. It's over, his court-appointed attorney said.

But nothing is ever over for Jimmy Colvin. It is his life that is at stake, and he fights for it every day. In May 2019, he filed a motion to amend his sentence, submitted a habeas corpus petition in federal court to challenge the constitutionality of his eighty-year sentence, and prepared a civil suit arguing that his federal time served should be concurrent with his state time served.

He no longer has a court-appointed attorney, but he has learned the law.

On July 9, 2019, Jimmy's application for postconviction relief was again denied. Yet Jimmy remains the embodiment of hope and persistence. Every time he describes his latest filing, he assures me that this is the ticket, this is the one that will set him free.

In recent years, Jimmy's interest in Catholicism has blossomed. After the Archbishop of New Orleans celebrated mass in the prison, Jimmy thanked him, and later wrote him, saying "with your help and support, I could grow a serious religious order for men who have nothing else in life but to serve God's will."

The Archbishop wrote back, outlining the requirements of founding a religious order and asking a nun to consult with the spiritual director of the Discalced Carmelites, a Catholic order founded in 1562, about the possibility.

Jimmy was elated. He has recruited other inmates who are interested and is waiting to hear from the sister about next steps. He intends to continue the work of forming a religious order even if he is released.

My husband and I visited Jimmy last year. As we were driving away, a guard asked him why someone would come all the way from Minnesota to see him. "They're my friends," he said, "and I am a pretty good old guy. Besides, if you got to know me, you might visit me, too."

Jimmy is now sixty-three years old. According to the United States Sentencing Commission, the recidivism rate for offenders aged sixty or older is lower than any other age group across all criminal history categories, just about 11 percent.

Jimmy's greatest hope is to be able to live a few good years on the outside before he dies.

Recently, he told me about an old, chronically ill man who was moved out of the unit to the hospice facility in Angola prison to die and be buried. Jimmy worries that this will happen to him; the shame of it, he says, of dying alone, of dying in prison, of being buried in Angola for all eternity with only his name and number on a concrete cross.

"I am a child of God," he wrote. "I have been lost, but I pray to be found. I am waiting."

We're all waiting. I'm waiting for the day when every call from Jimmy doesn't begin with "This is a call from a Louisiana correctional facility . . ." Why can't Jimmy go home? ♦



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